

## Overcrowding chronic at prisons in Vacaville

By Jason Massad/Staff Writer

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**Thursday, August 05, 2004** - California State Prison-Solano and the California Medical Facility in Vacaville are overcrowded with inmates and no end is in sight, according to a grand jury report released this week.

The facilities originally were configured to hold many fewer inmates than are now there, and emergency measures to house overflow inmates - including converting gyms, day-use rooms and meeting spaces to cells - has become commonplace at both prisons.

CSP Solano, rebuilt to house about 5,800 inmates, now has a population of more than 6,000. The California Medical Facility, a transitional prison for sick and mentally ill convicts, was designed for 2,300 inmates and now holds more than 3,200, said the report.

The grand jury, while complimenting the prisons for being clean and well run, recommends that the state Department of Corrections and the California Department of Mental Health tackle the problem of overcrowding.

"The (facilities are) overcrowded," said the report. "Overcrowding should be addressed and resolved by the responsible agencies."

Prison officials at both facilities acknowledged that overcrowding is a chronic problem that has been prevalent for many years.

The number of inmates that are pouring into prisons across the state, however, is difficult to control, said Mary Neade, spokeswoman at CSP Solano.

California's total inmate population is more than 162,000, according to state statistics.

"What can we do?," she asked. "We're subject to take what we receive. I'm sure that if you were to look at the (California Department of Corrections) as a whole, you'd see other institutions are in the same situation."

CSP Solano, in fact, has enacted emergency measures to make room for inmates that are being transferred from Folsom State Prison, Neade said.

The prison in Folsom is sending lower-risk inmates to Solano, while it receives higher-risk offenders shipped in from Southern California.

To accommodate the overflow, CSP Solano is housing inmates in its gym and is triple-bunking inmates in cells.

"It's a temporary situation," Neade said.

Officials at CMF said they are also doing what they can to accommodate an overflow number of inmates.

Currently, dorms are being built in the space that serves as the prison yard.

The new facilities when completed, however, will keep up with demand that was projected several years ago, said spokesman Lt. Steve Norris.

"I would agree that this institution is overcrowded," he said. "I think what we're doing here is getting to the things (now) that were projected two or three years ago."

The grand jury, required to look at Solano's prisons every year as part of the California Penal Code, criticized CMF for a "major" nursing shortage.

Since one of the focuses of the facility is psychological treatment and medical care for prisoners, the shortage is a significant issue, said the grand jury.

Norris agreed, but said nursing shortages are a nationwide problem that have no easy solution.

"Yes, we have had downsizing in nurses, we've had openings. We've had issues, like everybody else.

It's not specific to this institution or the California Department of Corrections," he said.

**The grand jury, meanwhile, complimented CSP Solano for an industry program "that gives meaningful work and occupational training" to some inmates.**

**Those enrolled in the program fabricate placards for disabled motorists and fashion prescription eyeglasses for Medi-Cal recipients, among other items.**

An effective substance abuse program offered at the prison also was praised.

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